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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest discusses children's play and its relationship to developmental growth from infancy to middle childhood. Discussion focuses on: (1) sensorimotor play in which infants and toddlers experiment with bodily sensation, motor movements, objects, and people; (2) pretend play in which children carry out action plans, take on roles, and transform objects as they express their ideas and feelings about the social world; and (3) games with rules which usually involve two or more sides, competition, and agreed-upon criteria for determining a winner. Concluding discussion suggests ways in which educators and other adults can support children's play. (RH)

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The Nature of Children's Play

David Fernie

In play, children expand their understanding of themselves and others, their knowledge of the physical world, and their ability to communicate with peers and adults. This digest discusses children's play and its relationship to developmental growth from infancy to middle childhood. The digest also suggests ways in which educators and other adults can support children's play.

Sensorimotor Play

In what Piaget (1962) aptly described as sensorimotor practice play, infants and toddlers experiment with bodily sensation and motor movements, and with objects and people. By 6 months of age, infants have developed simple but consistent action schemes through trial and error and much practice. Infants use action schemes, such as pushing and grasping, to make interesting things happen. An infant will push a ball and make it roll in order to experience the sensation and pleasure of movement.

As children master new motor abilities, simple schemes are coordinated to create more complex play sequences. Older infants will push a ball, crawl after it, and retrieve it. When infants of 9 months are given an array of objects, they apply the same limited actions to all objects and see how they react. By pushing various objects, an infant learns that a ball rolls away, a mobile spins, and a rattle makes noise. At about 12 months, objects bring forth more specific and differentiated actions. At this age, children will throw or kick a ball, but will shake rattles.

In a toddler's second year, there is growing awareness of the functions of objects in the social world. The toddler puts a cup on a saucer and a spoon in her mouth. During the last half of this year, toddlers begin to represent their world symbolically as they transform and invent objects and roles. They may stir an imaginary drink and offer it to someone (Bergen, 1988). Adults initiate and support such play. They may push a baby on a swing or cheer its first awkward steps. Children's responses regulate the adult's actions. If the swing is pushed too high, a child's cries will guide the adult toward a gentler approach. In interactions with adults such as peekaboo, children learn to take turns, act with others, and engage others in play.

Pretend Play

As children develop the ability to represent experience symbolically, pretend play becomes a prominent activity. In this complex type of play, children carry out action plans, take on roles, and transform objects as they express their ideas and feelings about the social world (Garvey, 1984).

Action plans are blueprints for the ways in which actions and events are related and sequenced. Family-related themes in action plans are popular with young children, as are action plans for treating and healing and for averting threats.

Roles are identities children assume in play. Some roles are functional: necessary for a certain theme. For example, taking a trip requires passengers and a driver. Family roles such as mother, father and baby are popular, and are integrated into elaborate play with themes related to familiar home activities. Children also assume stereotyped character roles drawn from the larger culture, such as nurse, and fictional character roles drawn from books and television, such as He-Man. Play related to these roles tends to be more predictable and restricted than play related to direct experiences such as family life (Garvey, 1984).

As sociodramatic play emerges, objects begin to influence the roles children assume. For example, household implements trigger family-related roles and action plans, but capes stimulate superhero play. Perceptually bound younger children may be aided by the provision of realistic objects (Fein, 1981). Even three-year-olds can invent and transform objects to conform to plans.

By the age of four or five, children's ideas about the social world initiate most pretend play. While some pretend play is solitary or shared with adults, preschoolers' pretend or sociodramatic play is often shared with peers in the school or neighborhood. To implement and maintain pretend play episodes, a great deal of shared meaning must be negotiated among children. Play procedures may be talked about explicitly, or signaled subtly in role-appropriate action or dialogue. Players often make rule-like statements

to guide behavior ("You have to finish your dinner, baby"). Potential conflicts are negotiated. Though meanings in play often reflect real world behavior, they also incorporate children's interpretations and wishes. The child in a role who orders a steak and piece of candy from a pretend menu is not directly copying anything he has seen before.

Construction play with symbolic themes is also popular with preschoolers, who use blocks and miniature cars and people to create model situations related to their experience.

A kind of play with motion, rough and tumble play, is popular in preschool years. In this play, groups of children run, jump, and wrestle. Action patterns call for these behaviors to be performed at a high pitch. Adults may worry that such play will become aggressive, and they should probably monitor it. Children who participate in this play become skilled in their movements, distinguish between real and feigned aggression, and learn to regulate each other's activity (Garvey, 1984).

Games with Rules

Children become interested in formal games with peers by age five or younger. Older children's more logical and socialized ways of thinking make it possible for them to play games together. Games with rules are the most prominent form of play during middle childhood (Piaget, 1962).

The main organizing element in game play consists of explicit rules which guide children's group behavior. Game play is very organized in comparison to sociodramatic play. Games usually involve two or more sides, competition, and agreed-upon criteria for determining a winner. Children use games flexibly to meet social and intellectual needs. For example, choosing sides may affirm friendship and a pecking order. Games provide children with shared activities and goals. Children often negotiate rules in order to create the game they wish to play (King, 1986). They can learn reasoning strategies and skills from strategy games like checkers. In these games, children must consider at the same time both offensive alternatives and the need for defense. Many card games encourage awareness of mathematics and of the psychology of opponents. Such games can be intellectually motivating parts of pre- and primary school curriculum (Kamii & DeVries, 1980, Kamii, 1985).

The Adult Role in Children's Play

These general guidelines may be helpful:

- *Value children's play and talk to children about their play.* Adults often say "I like the way you're working," but rarely, "I like the way you're playing."

- *Play with children when it is appropriate, especially during the early years.* If adults pay attention to and engage in children's play, children get the message that play is valuable.
- *Create a playful atmosphere.* It is important for adults to provide materials which children can explore and adapt in play.
- *When play appears to be stuck or unproductive, offer a new prop, suggest new roles, or provide new experiences, such as a field trip.*
- *Intervene to ensure safe play.* Even in older children's play, social conflicts often occur when children try to negotiate. Adults can help when children cannot solve these conflicts by themselves (Caldwell, 1977). Adults should identify play which has led to problems for particular children. They should check materials and equipment for safety. Finally, adults should make children aware of any hidden risks in physical challenges they set for themselves.

For More Information

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